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ABSTRACT

Not long ago, foreign languages were taught in schools and colleges not for practical use or cultural understanding, but for intellectual discipline, understanding of English grammar and syntax, vocabulary enrichment, or to allow reading of foreign literature. The space race and development of jet travel changed attitudes toward language learning and teaching methodology. An informal survey of 43 university foreign language students in 2 classes investigated motivations for studying a language. Many ranked personal interest first. Cultural understanding was ranked first by a smaller group, and six students gave usefulness in a future career as a primary reason for language study. Other reasons included usefulness in graduate school, fulfilling a requirement, desire to be cultured, or interacting with relatives or friends. Literature study was not ranked first by anyone, and travel was also relatively low on the scale of importance. World events and the teaching profession have focused on languages as a means of communication. The profession may be neglecting traditional reasons for language study and not reaching students who might take foreign languages for some of those reasons. The importance of long-term language study for proficiency in all language skills and the role of language in cultural understanding also should be emphasized. (MSE)

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RE-EXAMINING TRADITIONAL VALUES

IN

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Re-examining Traditional Values in Foreign Language Teaching

As recently as thirty-five years ago, few people gave serious thought to the possibility of routine travel to distant countries. Foreign languages were taught then in our schools, colleges and universities for reasons similar to those given for the teaching of mathematics. Both mathematics and foreign languages were purported to be good for our mental discipline. Since few of the students who studied foreign languages could ever hope to travel, it was assumed that a practical use of another language was neither essential nor, perhaps, even within the grasp of most individuals. Many high school and college students took foreign language courses, but, by and large, their almost-universal lament in later life was that "I never learned much" or "We never spoke the language". The conventional wisdom was that foreign languages were not very useful, and that few people ever learned another language well enough to use it.

Two things occurred to change this attitude. The first was the launching of Sputnik in 1957. The second was the development of the jet airliner, which, by 1965, had all but taken over from the much slower and smaller propeller-driven airliner.

Russia's acquiring the lead in space travel caused a furor in the United States. The nation began to flagellate itself for being behind the Russians in mathematics and the sciences. It was hastily concluded that our lack of information about what scientists were doing in other countries, especially in the Soviet Union, could be laid to the inadequacy of the language

teaching in American schools. Congress then initiated a series of funding programs in an effort to improve the teaching of mathematics, the sciences and foreign languages. Those of us who were teaching in the sixties remember well the special summer programs for secondary-school language teachers, and we remember, perhaps even more fondly, that universities were rich with government money with which to hire new faculty at very competitive salaries.

The jetliner made rapid travel to foreign countries relatively easy; its ability to carry large numbers of passengers eventually made overseas travel relatively cheap, and therefore within the grasp of large numbers of people who theretofore would not have seriously considered vacations or business dealings on the other side of the globe. We have seen, since the sixties, an incredible growth in the rate of travel abroad, and trips which in my youth could only be seen as impossible dreams are now commonplace among college and even high school students.

If a survey had been made among high school students of forty years ago as to why they were studying a particular foreign language, the answers would probably have been, essentially, a repetition of the reasons mouthed by high school teachers in their classes, that is that languages helped to discipline one's mind, like mathematics; that learning foreign languages helped one understand English grammar; that, in the case of French and

Latin, one's English vocabulary could be considerably enriched; that a student of foreign languages could ultimately hope to read foreign literatures in the original languages; and, last but not necessarily least, one became a more cultured and refined individual through a knowledge of certain languages (read French and Latin). Individual languages were assigned a kind of mythical hierarchy: German was useful for scientists, although the language itself was said to be "guttural"; Spanish was easier than French and had some utility were one to be interested in trade with the banana republics; French was the language of high culture and was the vehicle through which the refined person could have access to the arcane world of Racine, Baudelaire, Flaubert and Gothic architecture. Italian, of course, was not very useful, although it was the language of lovers.

The methodology of pre-Sputnik language teaching was almost universally that of grammar and translation, and the assumption was that most students would never learn to speak a foreign language. Those who did learn to speak another language did so by getting a thorough grounding in irregular verbs before proceeding to advanced classes in college in which they simply were expected to start using the language, usually for discussions of literature.

In recent years, the cultural or scientific reasons for studying foreign languages have probably taken a back seat to the goals of learning languages for several more immediately

practical purposes. Language pedagogy has changed to reflect this different emphasis. Textbooks now stress, under the guise of a variety of methods, "communication", i.e., the practical use of foreign languages. In some universities, the first-year courses resemble freshman high school courses, sometimes to the dismay of certain members of the faculty who wish that students could know more grammar and vocabulary as they suddenly confront literature and grammar/composition courses in their third year.

When I first considered this topic, I assumed that, if asked, students would give as their primary purpose for the study of languages the very practical goal of foreign travel--for overseas study or for future vacations. I also assumed that in second place would come the study of languages for some future use in a career related to international business, or that students would see the study of a foreign language as giving them a leg up on other candidates in the competitive business job market. Not wishing to proceed without some hard data, however scanty, I recently prepared a short questionnaire asking junior and senior students in two of my classes to list, in order of importance, the reasons why <u>they</u> were studying a foreign language). I quizzed 43 students in two third-year college French classes. I had expected travel to be the number one reason why present-day students studied other languages (in this case, French), but travel, in fact, occupied third place behind several other purposes stated by the students. Twenty-eight students put

"personal interest" in first place. Second place honors went to "cultural understanding", with 11 students placing this highest on their list of priorities, and seventeen putting it second. Six students gave as their primary reason that the language might be useful in their future career (and a further eleven gave this as second and third place motives). There were a smattering of other reasons, such as the potential usefulness of the language in graduate school, the need to fulfill a requirement, the desire to be or to be seen as cultured, having relatives or friends who speak the language, and the even "the love of language". Not one student put the study of a foreign literature in its original language in first place, although four put it in second place, and one put it third. Travel, the reason that would seem to cry out to us as one of the primary goals of language study at this time, actually came out rather low on the scale of values of these students. Only one student placed it first, two placed it second, and five third.

The once-predominant cultural reason for language study--the training of students to read foreign literatures--would seem to have virtually disappeared, and it has been replaced not by travel and tourism, but by considerable curiosity about the languages and the cultures of other nations (I differentiate this kind of cultural study from the old-fashioned one of making an individual more cultured or appearing to be more cultured. Modern

students are, it seems, more down-to-earth about their reasons for foreign language study).

The premise of this paper was that we are not stressing enough some of the so-called old-fashioned values once attributed to language study. The launching of Sputnik occasioned a major shift in the direction of language teaching, and I suspect that the teaching profession has, to a large extent, itself been responsible for bringing students to see languages as a means to communication (an ill-defined concept in the minds of many students, I suspect). Many of the lower-level textbooks that have been coming out in recent years reflect this shift in values, and almost certainly contain some reference to "communication" in their titles or in the expression of their avowed purpose. Somehow, in the past, the message must have been lost that languages have "communication" as their essential purpose. The so-called communicative textbooks tend to stress oral and aural skills, and may go light on grammatical explanations or on the teaching of reading. The question of the relative pedagogical values of oral/aural methods versus grammar/translation methods is, to my way of thinking, not yet resolved, and it is not my intention to enter that arena today. What I want to say here is that the shift in emphasis in language teaching has led textbook authors and, I think, language departments, to stress the value of foreign languages for communication, thus giving the impression to the lower-level language learner that he should

consider a foreign language as essentially a tool for use in traveling or for making business deals in his future career.

The question of purpose in language teaching often divides language departments along a language-literature line, with, frequently, those who teach literature insisting that all language study should lead students to the study of literature. These individuals are, in fact, suggesting that language study has a primarily intellectual goal. So-called "language oriented" instructors, on the other hand, may believe that there exist other, equally valid goals, and that language learning, per se, is equally as challenging an intellectual exercise as is the study of literature.

My intent in this paper is to suggest that when we in the language-teaching profession emphasis communication as the primary goal of language learning, we may not be paying enough attention to the classical reasons for language study, and that, as a result, we may not be reaching students who would, if properly approached, take foreign language courses for some or all of those classical reasons in preference to the communicative rationale. My unscientific survey suggests that this could be so --that the inherent appeal of language study may bring in a number of students who are essentially uninterested in the travel or business applications of foreign languages.

One of the classical reasons given for the value of foreign language study was that the student could improve his knowledge

of the roots of English words, thereby improving his ability to use his newly-expanded vocabulary. Students who study a Western European language soon become aware of the Indo-European connection. They learn, intuitively or with the help of their instructors, that European languages share a wealth of vocabulary, and that many European languages share a basic grammatical structure that identifies them as Indo-European. I will mention parenthetically that ad hoc courses at Michigan State dealing with the roots of English words have been very popular. A spinoff of any language course can be an increased awareness of words, of their roots, and ultimately, of their inherent meaning. Students not infrequently mention their gratitude for having been brought to think about words, to learn their origins, to understand the meanings of the large corpus of foreign--notably French--words that make up the English vocabulary. In our proselytizing, we in the profession might take advantage of this latent enthusiasm for enlarging vocabulary and understanding the original meaning of foreign language words which have been adopted by. This effect will be more obvious with French, which has contributed such a large body of vocabulary through the Anglo-Norman connection, but many word relationships with German can be demonstrated, as can, directly or indirectly, the similarity between many English words and etymologically related Spanish or Italian words.

Another classical reason for foreign language study was its supposedly beneficial effect on the student's English grammar and syntax. The supposition is tenuous and hard to prove. Nevertheless, it is very common for students--and graduates--to state that the study of a foreign language was extremely helpful to them in learning about English grammar. Some years ago, the language profession unashamedly said this. We should not now shy away from stating the improvement of our overall linguistic understanding to be, if not a primary goal of language study, at the very least an ancillary benefit that will be more and more appreciated as the student progresses through a language program. Saying this, I would presuppose that third- and fourth-year language courses would be taught with at least some emphasis on comparisons of the ways in which English and the foreign language are structured.

The writing skills of our present-day students have been assailed in recent years in any number of popular and learned publications. While it is unrealistic to expect that foreign language courses can remedy a lack of skill that has been many years in the making, we can at least expect that the attention to syntactical analysis that is made in upper-level language courses can have some beneficial effect on students who are being asked to make intelligent translation from and to the foreign language. It is hardly conceivable that advanced composition courses would not draw attention to the syntactic differences between

languages. Some attention would likely be paid in such courses to the ways in which English and the foreign language deal with stylistic considerations.

Language professionals often say--and probably believe--that the study of foreign languages can have the effect of opening up new horizons for our culturally-limited students. We need to tell our students that languages differ, sometimes radically, in the ways in which they accomplish the task of communicating ideas. In an era in which many individuals advocate an increasing awareness of the cultures of other nations, we could be stressing this notion of relativity regarding languages, emphasizing to our students that knowing how other languages express ideas--sometimes more efficiently than in English, sometimes less so, sometimes more colorfully, sometimes less so--is a step in the direction of making individuals of one nation more tolerant of the peoples of other nations. Intensive training in translation can bring to students a kind of awareness of the sort I have just described. We in the profession could stress this intangible, perhaps elusive benefit of language study, especially as it pertains to students who have continued into the advanced levels.

Over the years, it has become apparent to me that undergraduate language majors only just begin to understand the subtleties of literary texts in a foreign language at about the time they are graduating. The better students, who have put considerable effort into their advanced grammar and syntax

classes, begin to enjoy reading for the intellectual pleasure that can be derived from understanding how good writers achieve effects that are obvious to most literate native speakers of a language. Although the study of literature per se does not appear to be a primary goal of many students who begin to study foreign languages, it seems to me that we as a profession might emphasize the delight that awaits students who persist in their studies long enough to achieve the kind of understanding that makes reading pleasurable and meaningful. Something that becomes obvious to those of us who teach languages is that language proficiency requires years of study and practice, but our profession, by and large, does not seem to emphasize to students, nor to the general public, that languages are not learned overnight. We need, I believe, to stress the importance of continuous, long-term study in order to reach a level of proficiency whereby a language can be useful for both oral communication and for reading and writing on an interesting and satisfying level. By not emphasizing to our students that proficiency takes considerable time, but that in the end many intangible benefits will accrue--such as the improvement of one's writing skills both in the foreign language and in English--we may be ignoring an incentive for language study of which a fair number of students are probably not aware.

While we are stressing the joys of literature, we might also make clear to our students the need to understand the cultures of

other nations through direct access to all forms of writing: newspapers, magazines, books, many virtually unknown to us in translation, become an "open sesame" to the individual who can read them with a degree of fluency. A colleague, recently returned from a short holiday in Europe, recounted to me an interesting experience in an English train. Seeing a young lady reading a technical treatise in French, he asked if she were French. She said that she was Dutch, and asked why he wanted to know. My colleague expressed surprise that the young lady could read another language so well. "Perfectly normal", she replied, expressing a not-uncommon European attitude: there is no great mystery about knowing the languages of our neighbors; we need to do this, and we just do it. Would that we could communicate to our students the numerous benefits of foreign language study, and may the day come when many of our students are as matter-of-fact about the desirability of learning other languages as was the Dutch girl who thought that reading French was "perfectly normal."